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SUBJECT: MACEDONIAN ISLAMIC LEADERS ON WAHHABISM,
DENATIONALIZATION, FISCAL CHALLENGES

REF: 06 SKOPJE 898

Classified By: POLOFF JHUGHES FOR REASONS 1.4(B) & (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Key Islamic leaders in Macedonia report a slight decline in the influence of Wahhabists in their muftiates. The leaders are focused on denationalization of land that formerly belonged to them, and blame their current financial challenges on the slow pace of denationalization. Sustained fiscal shortfalls in the budgets of the muftiates could open possibilities for more fundamentalist Islamic influence in those communities, although the experience of one of the muftiates suggests that fundamentalist influence can be countered by funding programs that benefit the entire community. End summary.

OUTREACH TO KEY ISLAMIC LEADERS

¶2. (U) POLOFF met separately with the muftis (Islamic scholars and community leaders) of Skopje, Tetovo, and Gostivar -- which together are home to most of Macedonia's Muslims -- in late April and early May as part of Post's outreach to influential Islamic leaders. Key issues discussed included Wahhabist influence in their muftiates, denationalization of Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) property, and fiscal challenges facing the Islamic community.

WAHHABIST INFLUENCE WANING?

¶3. (C) According to Skopje Mufti Taxhedin Bislimi, Wahhabist influence has been declining in his muftiate over the past year. He claimed that the former mufti, in collaboration with the previous government, was more tolerant of Wahhabists and had allowed Wahhabist-affiliated Muslims to work at the headquarters of the ICM. That no longer was the case, he said, asserting that Wahhabist supporters no longer worked at the ICM headquarters. Bislimi claimed, however, that Wahhabists still control or strongly influence two important mosques in Skopje, including the well-known Jaja Pasha Mosque. At another mosque, he said, one person who had studied in Saudi Arabia had taken it upon himself to push Wahhabist teachings on congregation members. Members of the congregation were not receptive, Bislimi said, although he admitted that more fundamentalist Islamic teaching could gain traction with the congregation over time.

¶4. (C) Gostivar Mufti Shaqir Fetahu said he was not concerned about the presence of Wahhabists within his muftiate. He acknowledged that Wahhabists were present in Gostivar, but

stated that he had firm control over all of the mosques in his muftiate. Fetahu suggested that the Wahhabists in Gostivar were under close surveillance, and that he was aware of their movements and activities. He acknowledged that the Wahhabists could pose a potential challenge to his authority, but insisted he had taken preemptive measures to reduce their opportunities for influencing others.

DENATIONALIZATION OF LAND -- SLOW PROGRESS

15. (C) Tetovo Mufti Alifekri Esati and the Skopje Mufti both complained about lack of progress in denationalizing land that formerly belonged to the Islamic community. Esati mentioned that he and ICM Reis (leader) Sulejman Rexhepi had raised the issue with Prime Minister Gruevski in mid-April. Esati said Gruevski had pledged to return the Tetovo muftiate's land in a timely fashion, but Esati was skeptical that Gruevski would follow through. He claimed that he had heard the same message from every political leader in Macedonia for the past 15 years, but that there had been no positive movement on the issue. Gostivar Mufti Fetahu, however, noted that the Gostivar muftiate had received approximately 90 percent of its formerly nationalized land from the GOM; the remaining 10 percent of the nationalized lands had been converted to public parks and would remain under public ownership.

16. (C) Tetovo Mufti Esati stated that he and his staff were carefully monitoring GOM-owned land that once had belonged to the muftiate. Muftiate authorities had prevented anyone from building on the land, in order to avoid future property claims based on "squatters' rights." Skopje Mufti Bislimi worried that the government would try to compensate the muftiate for land currently under its control, instead of returning it. He warned that the government would undervalue

the property in making any compensation arrangement, and cited the muftiate of Stip as an example -- the government allegedly had reimbursed that muftiate at a rate of 25 MKD per square meter, or less than 0.10 USD per square foot. Both the Skopje and Tetovo muftis reiterated that the return to ICM ownership of lands that had been confiscated was necessary to help ensure the financial health of their muftiates.

FISCAL CHALLENGES FOR SKOPJE AND TETOVO

17. (SBU) Gostivar Mufti Fetahu, unlike his peers in Skopje and Tetovo, did not express concerns about the fiscal health of his muftiate. Showing a keen understanding of the concept of "soft power," he noted that the muftiate spent money on community projects in an effort to both improve the community's standard of living and lessen the influence of foreign funding that might seek to do the same. Fetahu underscored his non-partisan approach to funding such projects, and underscored the importance of ensuring economic security and opportunity for members of his muftiate.

18. (U) In contrast to Fetahu's more sanguine approach, the Skopje and Tetovo muftis bemoaned their respective financial plights. Tetovo Mufti Esati complained that his muftiate had to rely almost entirely on donations of congregation members, most of whom were unemployed or poorly-paid laborers. Despite the overall lack of funding, however, he praised his congregation members for their generous giving. Skopje Mufti Bislimi matter-of-factly blamed his predecessor for the muftiate's financial woes. He explained that the former mufti had accumulated debts to the GOM of Euros 1.3 million (approximately 1.7 million USD), which he did not expect could be repaid anytime soon.

COMMENT

19. (C) Despite the three muftis' general claims that Wahhabist influence is declining slightly, their relatively weak fiscal health (with the exception of Gostivar) and the slow pace of denationalization suggests there is room for potential expansion of fundamentalist Islamic influence in

those areas. Gostivar's experience shows, however, that Wahhabist influence can be countered through prudent fiscal practice (boosted by denationalization receipts) and the development and funding of programs that benefit the entire community.

WOHLERS